Géza was succeeded by his son, Stephen (997–1038). The forces of the old order saw this as an opportune moment and rose up against him and the new centralised power. This was no pagan revolt against Christianity (even if their supporters were drawn from among the pagan population), but semi-barbarian chieftains, who had nominally converted to Christianity, rising to contest the power of the prince. Stephen's crushing defeat of Koppány¹ and the other chieftains shaped the country's destiny; Hungary would not be a realm divided into principalities at the time of its integration into feudal Europe. To secure his power Stephen requested, and received, a crown from the pope and had himself crowned king in 1000 (the date was obviously chosen for its symbolic value). With this decisive act Hungary became an independent Christian kingdom and secured a lasting membership in the social and political order of feudal Europe. (The Bohemian and Polish states were founded at about the same time.) Based on the authority granted by the pope, Stephen began the organisation of the church. He founded an archdiocese in Észtorgom (northwest of Buda in the Danube Bend) and established ten bishoprics; he also made extensive donations to various churches, introduced the tithe,² encouraged the building of new churches and made the attendance of mass compulsory.

The same time as the organisation of church institutions, the basis for the organisation of the state was also laid down, involving the creation of a network of royal counties (vármegye), each administered from a stronghold (vár). These strongholds were at first generally earthwork forts, a construction which the conquering Hungarians knew well.

The network of royal manors supporting and maintaining the royal court evolved independently of the state apparatus of the royal county. The level of agricultural production and the rudimentary conditions of transportation compelled the king and his retinue to be constantly on the move from one royal estate to another in order to collect, and consume, the revenues. Throughout the realm the work of the serfs and the storage of the produce which were duly consumed by the court and the armed retinue were directed and overseen by these royal manors. The queen and the princes also developed their own manors.

The permanent winter quarters of the tribal and clan leaders were transformed into private estates, whilst the lands of the rebellious clan leaders were confiscated and subsequently donated to the king’s followers, foreign settlers and the church. The system of clan and tribal lands was supplanted by private estates. Donations were conferred in word only; the church alone committed its rights and privileges to writing. Four of the twenty charters recording donations to the church have survived, including the founding charter of the Pannonhalma abbey (in Western Hungary, near Győr) in 1002. These

¹ The conflict between Stephen and Koppány, the forces of western Christianity and traditional Hungarian culture, around 998, is the subject of the most popular Hungarian rock opera, István a király (Stephen the King), which was first staged in 1983, and generated a huge revival of national sentiments among the young in late Communist Hungary.

² tithe: a form of feudal tax to support the Christian church, traditionally one-tenth of all produce.
documents were all written in Latin, the language of the church, but some of them preserved valuable traces of Old Hungarian (mostly place names, but occasionally fragments of Hungarian sentences as well).

The rules of the new state order were set down by Stephen I in two law codes (also written in Latin). These are essentially penal codes as they are full of penalties designed to guarantee the privileges of the church, to protect the new system of landownership, to secure the rights of the feudal lords and to prevent crime. The king drew up these laws with “the bishops and nobility of Hungary”, and a ‘senate’ – an expression used in these law codes – was apparently also active in his court. Clan vendettas are not mentioned – that is, there were no prohibitions against them – which suggests that by this time clan relations based on blood ties had completely dissolved, and that the tribal organisation of Turkic origin, which had still existed in the Conquest period, had been supplanted by a lord-serf relationship.

The consolidation of the new order is clearly reflected by the fact that a new pilgrim route to the Holy Land went through Hungary by 1018. This pilgrim route sparked new life into trade and contributed to the stable conditions in the realm. At the same time the king and his followers invited pilgrims to take up permanent residence in Hungary. One of these pilgrims was Bishop Gellért, who was later canonised. The country founded by Stephen I maintained good relations with both Byzantium and the Holy Roman Empire, and tried to maintain a precarious balance between the two major European powers, thereby ensuring its own independence. Stephen’s wife was of royal German lineage, a Byzantine princess was chosen for his son, and his daughter was married to the son of the Venetian doge (Venice was a major sea mercantile power throughout the middle ages).

The oldest capital and royal seat was Esztergom, ancestral home of the Árpád clan and the seat of the senior archbishopric of the country. Another early royal center was Székesfehérvár (southwest of Buda), a station on the pilgrim route, where Stephen had a castle and a basilica built. Subsequently, it became the traditional coronation and burial site of most kings of the Árpád House.

In the course of his long reign (1000–1038) Stephen I, one of the greatest leaders in Hungarian history, implemented great changes but, unlike most of his contemporaries, with a minimum use of brute force. He was a true Christian monarch, renowned throughout Europe for his piety and wisdom, and was canonised in 1083.

His last years were clouded by problems of succession. According to Hungarian law succession generally passed to the oldest male member of the family, whereas European law was based on the right of primogeniture, or the succession of direct male offspring. Paying scant regard to ancestral Hungarian law, Stephen I prepared for the succession of his son, Prince Imre. Then, after the unexpected death of his son, he even ignored the custom of succession in the male line and advocated the succession of his son-in-law, Peter Orseolo, son of the doge of Venice. As a result of these uncertainties, the country was shaken by a series of succession struggles which threatened the very existence of the state founded by Stephen.

The struggle for the Hungarian throne became a constant factor from the mid-11th century onwards. The various modes of succession, the kings who died heirless, and the potential claimants who were driven away or had their eyes gouged out (and thus became unfit to sit on the throne) offered ample opportunities for the intervention and interference of dissenters and foreign powers. Some pretenders were supported by pagan revolts; some rallied behind the Christian, but neglected, chieftains, whilst those who were ousted from power sought refuge in neighbouring countries – Poland, Byzantium or the Holy Roman Empire – where they tried to raise support for their cause. Most pretenders returned with help from abroad. The most dangerous form of intervention came from the

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3 That is a very flattering statement but actually nobody knows how much brute force Stephen actually employed to secure his reign due to the scarcity of written sources (especially those independent of the king’s court).
Holy Roman Empire, since in return for his help, the emperor demanded the feudal vassalage of the country.

An agreement was usually reached at some point during the fight and the pretender to the throne received about one-third of the country (a duchy). The appeasement of the ‘minor king’, however, provided him with the necessary financial means to continue the armed struggle, rather than bringing about a lasting peace. The princes assembled new armies, minted coins and began fighting once more. The clashes between the throne and the dukedom, between ‘crown and sword’, were repeated time and again in the 11th century.

The consolidation of state power was finally achieved under the reign of Ladislas (László) I (1077–1095) and Coloman (Kálmán) the Booklover (1095–1116). Respect for property and legal security had all but vanished during these internal struggles. Ladislas resorted to Draconian measures in his fight against theft. Anyone caught stealing anything worth more than the price of a chicken was hanged.

Ladislas I founded bishoprics and monasteries, and he also established religious chapters which he made sure were generously endowed. These chapters played a crucial role in the dissemination of literacy and European Latin culture, and they also fulfilled the functions of notary public or places of authentication. As a result of King Ladislas's policy of close cooperation with the church and his successful consolidation of Hungary, various outstanding Hungarians (including King Stephen and Bishop Gellért) were canonised.

Following the demise of the royal Croatian dynasty, King Ladislas led a campaign against that country southwest of Hungary in 1091. Thus began a dynastic union between the two countries which was to last until 1918. The long-standing desire of the Hungarian kings was to gain access to the Adriatic Sea, but the coastal region, called Dalmatia, was under the control of Venice. Venice and the Hungarian kings struggled all through the middle ages, with varying success, for control of the key trading cities of the Dalmatian coast.

The most powerful enemy of Hungary in the late 11th and the 12th century was the renewed empire of Byzantium. A nomadic Turkic group, the Cumans, also invaded Transylvania and the eastern regions several times from present-day Romania, but Ladislas I inflicted a crushing defeat on them in the south. The heroic deeds of this ‘chivalrous king’ in the Cuman wars later became the subject of many legends.

King Coloman also led several campaigns beyond the borders of Hungary, securing lasting rule over Croatia. The last great clash between ‘crown and sword’ involved Coloman and his younger brother, Álmos. With the defeat of Prince Álmos, Coloman abolished the duchy system. He raised the levels of tolls and duties, regulated taxation and organised compulsory military service. He mitigated the law and revised the law codes of Stephen I and Ladislas; with the consolidation of feudal power there was no longer any need for cruel punishments. He was noted for his learning, fairly untypical of early medieval kings (many of them were illiterate), which was due to the fact that his uncle, László, originally wanted him to become a bishop and he was most probably ordained as well.

Royal power was consolidated in the 12th century. Foreign travellers to Hungary commented favourably on the fact that this large country was not split up into dukedoms and that its population was made to obey the law through the network of royal counties. Taxes were not high, yet the revenues of the king allowed him a splendid and extravagant court. The stabilised conditions were based on the strengthening of the feudal order, even though numerous archaic elements were retained in the process. The king’s authority was founded primarily on his own extensive estates, which covered about one-third of the country. The church, which relied on royal support and donations, tried to steer clear of internal dissent. Groups of secular magnates, dissatisfied with the king’s policies, instigated new succession struggles with a view to furthering their own ambitions and interests. Byzantium tried to bring Hungary under its sway by supporting various pretenders, and a series of long wars ensued between the two countries. This external
threat required a cautious policy from the Hungarian kings as they strove to maintain equilibrium. In addition they adopted a middle-of-the-road position, free of extremist views, in the conflict between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire of Western Europe.

The strength of the Kingdom of Hungary was consolidated by Béla III (1172–1196) at the close of the century. He was raised in the Byzantine court (taken there originally as a royal hostage by the Emperor, he became the Emperor’s adopted son and for a while he had a realistic chance of succeeding to the Byzantine throne), and on his return to Hungary the archbishop of Esztergom was reluctant to crown him king, fearing that this might lead to greater influence from the eastern church. However, Béla soon won the confidence of those who had initially received him with mistrust. He issued new coins modelled on the Byzantine currency, restored law and order to the realm. The king introduced crucial reforms to the administrative system. Court administration by word of mouth was succeeded by a new written form, based on the Byzantine model; Béla III issued a famous decree in 1181 by which matters discussed in his presence should be committed to writing. Written administration became institutionalised in the royal chancery he founded, and the charters of the period reflect a French influence, as many of the notaries were trained in Paris, including Anonymus, the nameless royal notary, best known as the author of the *Gesta Hungarorum*, one of the most important medieval Hungarian chronicles.

Béla III donated extensive estates to the secular lords in order to win their support, and, indeed, the donation of an entire royal county was first recorded under his rule. His personal estates, however, did not decrease significantly, and his economic power was strengthened as he encouraged urban growth and the settlement of foreigners within his kingdom.

It soon became clear that royal power could not be increased by use of the old methods. The 13th century saw a major decline in royal authority. Andrew II (1205–1235) considerably hastened the disintegration of the system of royal counties by regularly granting large tracts of royal estates to new owners who then interfered with the royal administration by collecting the royal taxes and subjecting freemen to their authority. The beneficiaries of these grants enjoyed great power and influence, and eventually there emerged a class of nobles (magnates) who formulated an ambitious policy of their own and supported various pretenders. The opponents of the new system were recruited from among those nobles who felt politically neglected, and the prelates who feared a permanent shift in the balance of power. As a consequence of the extensive donations and the growing power of the magnates the situation of the middle stratum of society became uncertain. The free soldiers of the king protested against the despotism of the magnates and began to create their own institutions. The king attempted to replenish his decreasing revenues by debasing the currency, i.e. by replacing old coins with new ones of inferior quality. He also leased out royal offices and certain royal revenues.

This discontent surfaced in court conspiracies and the schemings of the magnates, as well as in popular movements. A palace revolt broke out in 1213 claiming the life of Queen Gertrude, and the fact that this act went unpunished shows the extent to which royal power had weakened. In 1222 the disgruntled magnates seized power and, exploiting the discontent of the royal soldiers, the royal administrators and other groups, they forced the king to issue the so-called Golden Bull. Stamped by a golden seal, this ceremonious charter considerably reduced the rights of the king. These restrictions did not create a division of power between the estates but, by declaring certain rights, paved the way for future constitutionalism. The king was no longer allowed to give away entire counties, the leasing out of royal revenue offices was restricted, and tighter control was put on immigration. Certain clauses of the Golden Bull were devoted to the rights of the royal soldiers: they could not be harassed, the king alone could exercise jurisdiction over them, and the costs of arming them in the case of foreign military expeditions were to be borne by the king. These privileges became the basis of the emergence of the future gentry class, the lower level of Hungarian privileged social elite. The greatest restriction on royal power was set
down in the so-called resistance clause, which granted the nobility – i.e. the magnates – the right of armed resistance by stating that if the king or his successor “should violate any of these decrees ... it is the right of the nobles of the realm, together or separately, now and in the future, to resist and oppose ... without being charged with treason”. The resistance clause remained in force until its abolition in 1687, and formed the ideological basis for all future struggles by the nobility and, later, by their successors.

The Golden Bull did not result in any major changes in the king’s policy, and the political group which had enforced it was soon ousted from power. This political change was enacted by the heir apparent, the future Béla IV (1235–1270), who had already begun a review of earlier donations of land during the reign of his father. The country was also exhausted by the wanton waste of resources on futile military campaigns to conquer Halych, a Slavic state northeast of Hungary (in the territory of present Ukraine).

Béla’s review of earlier donations and the restoration of castle estates strengthened his own royal power. Although he did not entirely abandon the practice of donations, he did modernize it. He granted settlement rights to a group of Cumans and their leader in central Hungary (the area between the Danube and the Tisza) in 1239. The conflicts which ensued between the nomadic Cumans and the sedentary Hungarian peasants led to a series of bloody clashes, and eventually the Cumans withdrew from Hungary, killing and pillaging en route.

The biggest threat of medieval Hungary emerged suddenly, out of nowhere in 1241, when nomadic Mongolian armies (called Tatars by contemporaries) broke into the country from the northeast. Béla IV rallied a large army, but it was routed at Muhi (on the Sajó River in northeastern Hungary) and the eastern part of the realm was left open to plunder and destruction; the Mongolians then crossed the frozen Danube and sacked the western regions of the country, with only a few strongholds withstanding their onslaught. The king begged in vain for foreign aid, and he too was eventually forced to flee the country all the way to an island off the Dalmatian coast. The Mongolian army withdrew in the spring of 1242 upon receiving news of the death of the great khan.

Upon his return Béla IV found a devastated and depopulated country. He was faced not only with the task of rebuilding, but also with the creation of a new, stronger kingdom which would be able to resist renewed attack by the Mongolians. Béla IV is rightly remembered as the “second founder of the country”: he invited foreign settlers into the realm and granted tracts of land to the returning Cumans, whose military support he hoped to win; he encouraged the ecclesiastic and secular landowners to build new castles; he organised new royal counties in the hitherto unpopulated royal woodlands in the border areas; he himself built a castle and founded a town in the Buda hills (the future capital of Hungary), and granted privileges to existing towns. A law of 1267 acknowledged the noble status of the royal soldiers, and recognised their right to self-government of the ‘county of the gentry’. He made moves to include the emerging new order, that of the gentry, into the administration of power. He renounced his former policy of recovering royal estates and he himself donated further royal land. His foreign policy was designed to consolidate and strengthen the realm. Fortunately, the expected Mongolian invasion never came, and Béla IV was able to leave a flourishing country to his successors.

The country was successfully rebuilt and its further development drew from the experiences of previous centuries. The estimated population numbered over one million by the 13th century and earned its livelihood predominantly from cultivation and stock-breeding. The land was worked by servants and other people who had been forced into dependence, and a similar fate awaited the impoverished freemen who had retained merely their personal freedom, and were thus only obliged to perform a few services. The freemen and the servants gradually coalesced into a class of dependent serfs, equals in the eyes of the law, called jobbágy in Hungarian. Most villages came into existence in the 12th century and a dense network had evolved by the 14th century. Production was on two levels: one area was cultivated for the landowners, the yield of which form his property, and a separate plot of land was allotted to the serfs. The system of dues was codified in
1351: the peasants were obliged to pay a tithe (one-tenth of their produce) to the church and a ninth (another one-tenth) to the landowners. The serfs’ lot was not made any easier by the duty to perform compulsory labour service for their lord, and the imposition of various ‘gifts’ and some payments in currency. The peasant class did, however, have the right of free movement. This feudal system of production was only prevalent in the central, more densely populated regions of the country. Pastoralism and the opening up of new areas for cultivation still went on for many centuries in the border regions. However, state and feudal power eventually reached these areas too, and they could no longer evade inclusion into the feudal system. The settlement of the Carpathian Basin was complete by the close of the 13th century, which also contributed to the decline of the royal estates; since until then donated estates could easily be replaced with land from the peripheral areas of the realm.

The villages were in the possession of noble landowners, the gentry, the king and the church. Royal estates had originally accounted for about one-third of the realm, but this proportion gradually declined in favour of the private estates, which, by the late 13th century, covered the greater part of the country. Most ‘modern’ in terms of production were the estates owned by the church since the monastic orders arriving from the West generally brought more developed agrarian practices with them, which they passed on to the owners and workers, thus ensuring steady and continuous development.

The lower echelons of the ruling class, including the royal soldiers and the administrators, whose special legal status was codified in the Golden Bull, began to develop their own corporate organ, the county of the gentry, within the framework of the former royal counties. The first evidence of this comes from Zala County (southwest of Lake Balaton) and dates back to 1232; it records that the lesser landowners administered justice with the help of locally elected judges. However, they had no authority to enforce their decisions against the magnates, even though they could boast royal support.

Only a group of ‘distinguished lords’, later called nobles, had a say in matters of national policy, and, as the Hungarian word ‘noble’ (nemes) came to denote all privileged persons, they began to be known as barons (báró). The source of their power lay in their estates, which were granted by royal favour. If they lost their properties they would scheme and intrigue to elect a new king to the throne. The short life expectancy, the incessant wars and frequent falls from grace made the hereditary transmittance of estates all but impossible. The 13th century saw the appearance of second- and third-generation magnates who were increasingly concerned with the promotion of their own interests, and whose strength was founded on their estates and the support of a network of powerful relatives. They no longer relied on royal favour, regarding the king merely as a useful tool for strengthening their power and acquiring new estates.

Urban growth gained impetus from the mid-13th century. In the 12th century, privilege was granted only to the settlers of Fehérvár, suggesting that these privileges and rights referred to ‘guests’, rather than to real urban privileges. Later charters, however, invariably quoted ‘Fehérvár’ as an example. These privileges did not in themselves create towns. Esztergom and Fehérvár both owed their significance to the fact that they were royal seats. They were joined by Old Buda in the early 13th century and, later, by Pest, where urban growth was stimulated by lively trade, rather than by various privileges. Towns generally emerged around castles or near fords, and very often on sites where the ruins of antique Roman towns were still visible. However, there is no proof of any continuity between the Roman and medieval towns. The influx of ‘Latin’ (Italian and French) and German settlers played a key role in urban development. Later inhabitants included Jews from the west, as well as Muslims from the East. Trade in salt and livestock, however, remained under strict royal or ecclesiastic control and thus did not directly stimulate urban development.

In the three centuries that had elapsed since its foundation, the Hungarian state had managed to compensate for its historical shortcomings. Christianity was now firmly
rooted, the feudal economic system was established, there was a significant population growth, and the country was indeed linked to mainstream European development. The country was visited by traders, literacy was firmly established and all major intellectual and spiritual trends found their way into the realm. Romanesque architecture still reigned supreme, but the Gothic style also made its appearance in the late 13th century. Only the lower level of urban development, the dominance of stock-breeding in the economy and the practice whereby the village population moved out of their huts into tents in summer revealed the slower pace of feudal development when compared with the west.

The borders of the country had, in spite of various military campaigns led by the Hungarian kings and the onslaught of foreign armies, become stabilised in the Carpathians. Changes in the borders were common only in the politically unstable Balkans to the south. The military expeditions of the 13th century clearly show that the Hungarian kingdom was fully conscious of its strength.

The magnates who had grown powerful under Béla IV's successors no longer instigated succession struggles, but concentrated on establishing their own territorial power and simply ignored the king. This period is marked by feudal anarchy with leading families succeeding each other almost annually in the main offices; within the span of a few decades some of them filled the post of palatine (the highest rank in the royal court after the king) as many as five or six times. The councils which met with increasing frequency – and later developed into a parliament of the estates, traditionally called diet – tried unsuccessfully to restore order through various decrees. Ladislas IV the Cuman (1272–1290) tried to establish his power with the support of armed Cumans, and thereby lost the support of the church. After the ascension of Andrew III (1290–1301), the last king of the Árpád dynasty, the intervention of foreign powers increased and the disorder that prevailed meant that the country soon fell prey to pretenders and the magnates who supported them.

In this ‘classical’ period of feudal anarchy these pretender kings established principalities, minted money, collected taxes, pursued their own foreign policies and often became vassals of neighbouring kings in the border regions.

The extinction of the Árpád dynasty did not unleash a new wave of anarchy but, on the contrary, promoted the rise of a new, energetic and able leader from among the competing pretenders, who was able to successfully maintain his claim to the throne and who proved capable of winning the support of the magnates.